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To kill a rumor: Capote letter helps solve 'Mockingbird' mystery

Written on S. Shore, it debunks claim that Lee had help with novel

By **SUE SCHEIBLE**
The Patriot Ledger

A letter that Truman Capote wrote in 1959 while living on Clarks Island off the Duxbury coast may settle a literary mystery.

The two-page letter touches on the controversy of whether Nelle Harper Lee really wrote her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "To Kill a Mockingbird."

The recently discovered letter from Capote to a relative in Monroeville, Ala., appears to debunk the myth that Capote contributed to the writing of Lee's first and only work, the Huntsville Times in

Monroeville reported yesterday.

Capote's life is getting renewed attention this year because of the film "Capote." Lee was a childhood friend of Capote's and his own Pulitzer Prize winner, "In Cold Blood," is dedicated in part to her.

The Huntsville paper reported that Capote wrote the letter on July 9, 1959, to his aunt, Mary Ida Carter, while he was staying on Clarks Island, a small island that is part of Plymouth but connected to Duxbury. That was almost a year before

■ Nelle Harper Lee's
childhood vs. Scout Finch's
childhood
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"To Kill a Mockingbird" was released by the J.B. Lippincott publishing house on July 11, 1960. Capote spent the spring and summer of 1959 on Clarks Island.

"Yes, it is true that Nelle Lee is publishing a book," Capote wrote in the letter's final paragraphs, according to the newspaper. "I did not see Nelle last winter,

but the previous year, she showed me as much of the book as she'd written, and I

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A letter from author Truman Capote to his aunt in Alabama in 1959 indicates that he did not write "To Kill a Mockingbird," as rumor has it.

F&O photo

■ CAPOTE

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liked it very much. She has real talent."

The letter became public after Jennings Carter, Capote's cousin, gave it to the Monroe County Heritage Museums in Monroeville. The release of the film caused Carter, a childhood friend of Capote and of Lee, to donate his mother's keepsakes to the museum, the newspaper said.

"To Kill a Mockingbird" is the only novel written by Lee. Despite all the acclaim, she never wrote anything else. Because of that, there has been speculation for years that someone else wrote it or helped her edit it.

"That's something that has gone around for years, though not many people believed it," said author Bob Hale of Pembroke, the former owner of the Westwinds Book Shop in Duxbury and a member of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society.

Hale, who lived in Duxbury when Capote was there, met him once. "I know how the rumor got started, but I don't think he had anything to do with it. Capote and Lee were really very close and people who know his writing and her writing never believed it, because their styles are so different."

Capote came to Duxbury in 1959 at the urging of the poet John Malcolm Brinnin, whom Capote had met at the artists colony Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., Hale said. "Brinnin's mother had a lovely summer house out at Powder Point and talked Capote into coming there to work. There are lots of wonderful stories about him (Capote) in town."

One story, he said, is how Capote would go into Joslin's newsstand in Snug Harbor and stand there reading the magazines for a long time. "The owners of Joslin's were from old New England fisherman stock, and they had never seen anyone like him and he used to drive them nuts," Hale said. "He was just this very fey little creature, this bird of paradise who wouldn't leave."

Clint Watson, 73, of Duxbury recalled how Capote had rented a retreat on Clarks Island from Watson's brother, Howard, public relations manager for The Saturday Evening Post.

"Capote would come into town in my brother's boat (a mine tender from World War II) to do his shopping. He'd be in a director's chair in the back of the boat, and he always wore a long coat and a big hat. In July, if it was hot, he'd have an umbrella in the boat."

"To Kill a Mockingbird" is among the best-selling books in history with sales of more than 30 million copies. It was made into an Academy Award-winning film starring Gregory Peck

as Atticus Finch in 1962.

Claudia Durst Johnson, the former chairwoman of the English Department at the University of Alabama and a leading scholar on Lee, told the newspaper the long-standing rumors that Capote wrote or heavily edited the novel were "a goofy assertion."

The letter from Capote to Mary Ida Carter is proof that Lee was the only author of "To Kill a Mockingbird," according to Johnson's published comments.

Lee was Capote's next-door neighbor from 1928 to 1933. By the late 1950s, Capote had risen to fame with the publications of "The Grass Harp" and "Breakfast at Tiffany's." He wrote "In Cold Blood," published in 1965. The murders occurred Nov. 15, 1959.

Lee helped Capote research "In Cold Blood" in Kansas. Capote dedicated the book to Lee and to his partner, Jack Dunphy.

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